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## Panelist's Remarks

*Joel H. Meyers*

**I**n our Jewish faith we have just begun the year 5758, and there are two themes which flow through our prayers on the New Year, which have a direct bearing on the values which concern us in our conference. First we are asked to reflect seriously upon our own actions during the past year, to ask how our own behavior has influenced what has happened to our families and our communities. And second, in our long tradition, New Year celebrates the birthday of the world, the beginning of creation. Thus we are also asked to confront our place in God's world, to ask how we fit into God's plan. What are our responsibilities to the world in which we live?

So, with these themes resonating, I wish to open my remarks by setting down some guiding principles from within my tradition's teachings which I believe can serve for equitable involvement when one talks about caring for the world, caring for human beings, caring for the environment.

I want to thank the Archbishop, who in his remarks articulated the first principle: The Earth Is the Lord's. We are placed here not only to master Earth, as Genesis teaches us, but to till it, to be a partner with God in caring for the universe. In this regard, there is a wonderful commentary in our tradition which has God leading Adam around the Garden of Eden, showing Adam each tree and each plant, showing him the rivers, giving him an ecological tour, as it were, and showing him the beauty and magnificence of the garden. And then having God say to him, "All

of this has been created for your sake. So take care with it; take care not to foul or destroy the world. If you do, none will come after you to repair it. And what is worse, you will bring death to righteous people who will come after you." The root principle described here is one to which I think all of us subscribe. The world is our trust. We are tenants, and ultimately responsible to the landlord. We can do irreversible damage—or we can find ways to live in harmony. This is the challenge.

The second principle which offers guidance to all of us who care is that of communal responsibility. My tradition has placed tremendous emphasis on the well-being of community and the building of sound communal structures which benefit all. Rejected is the notion that ethics are relativistic or that ethics are private, and individuals or corporations or states have a right to do their own thing. Our view of society is that the organized community must play a positive, activist role. It is the obligation of the community to intervene in the economic and social fabric of the community itself in order to ensure fairness, protect health, provide for education, and so on.

In fact, we espouse a value that one cannot save oneself from injury by causing injury to one's neighbor. Unless the community has the responsibility for caring, for providing clean water, for well-being, it has violated a sacred obligation. Moreover, healthy communities are obligated to help less healthy communities,

because all is based upon the principle of justice. The Hebrew word for justice in the Bible is *tzedek*, which means righteousness. One does what is just, because one does what is right. Therefore we can never say that we count or that our community counts at the expense of another.

I believe these principles are those with which all of us would agree. Yet, as we have heard speaker after speaker say, there is difficulty in making them a reality. Why should this be? What makes it so difficult to implement ideals, to implement policies and practices which may bring benefit locally and ultimately to society as a whole?

I believe several things happen. First we often fail to confront the tensions caused by the paradoxes of values that we all face in a very complex world. One example: we have data that indicate that there is enough food in the world to feed everyone. Yet people are hungry because we have not taken the responsibility to distribute that food in a way that enables people to go to bed at night without feeling hungry, or because we wish to protect markets, or because we care only for ourselves.

There are major difficulties when we try to translate principles, ethics, and morals which we hold dear into action, precisely because there are conflicts of values. Another example: how do we handle the cost of repair to the ecosystem? It is very hard for people in developing or poor countries to incorporate into their development plans the programs that we in the industrial nations want when we look at the larger issues that confront us in terms of sustainable development or of global ecosystem management.

Thus it appears to me that one of the first things we have to do together is to acknowledge and address some of these values and paradoxes and their tensions. And we have to begin with small areas of work and move on to larger areas. Complex problems have to be broken down to smaller pieces and solved piece by piece. Someone once wrote that people live in communities of memory, and the language of the community is the language of origins and the past. It is not easy to move from the past or from the present into the future.

For any of us change is anxiety-provoking, and when we come on the scene as advice

givers and we say that we are going to help somebody grow, help the community prosper, help people change. It is extremely difficult even for people caught in poverty, for people caught in the throes of medical catastrophe, to be willing to try and risk change, much less to accept it. Thus I would say first we have to begin with small local groups which we encourage to change. Small groups, I contend, because generally we talk of massive numbers of people who need help, of entire species that are going to be destroyed, but individuals cannot plan well in massive terms. Somehow we have to be able to translate global concerns into languages and plans understood by local communities, to work with local communities at the grassroots level in order to have them understand that they can benefit more from change than from the status quo.

To be very concrete, here are the changes I would try to engage others to make, were I to so have the power, the wealth, and the ability: I would begin with a simple plan, by allocating resources that would help improve health on a local level. We know very clearly that in those areas of the world where we have been able to provide immunization programs, or simple treatments for certain diseases, or help people better manage waste, we have been able to accomplish immense good in relatively short periods of time. So I would first try to improve health, not only by providing doctors and nurses, but also by working to build the infrastructure needed to make change permanent in a good way to benefit the community's health.

The second area I would devote energy to would be education. Education promotes profound change. It empowers, it creates value, it enhances life. One of the great principles in my tradition is to use knowledge for gainful purpose. The world we live in requires people who know how to read and write. The transmission of knowledge, the exchange of information, is essential. We know the amazing impact for good that small increases in education have accomplished. For example, educating women, especially young women, has brought tremendous benefit both to them and to their societies.

And the third area in which I would put effort may be surprising. I would put energy

into connecting communities. Links between communities—roads, public transportation, communication. I think when there is difficulty in moving goods from place to place, when people face difficulty in traveling from place to place, it becomes very hard to overcome one's economic or social status. I understand that building roads or public transportation increases emissions and causes other problems. That is why I first spoke about the paradoxes of values. I believe the only way we can achieve just global management of our environment and our resources is by enabling individuals to feel at the local level that they have a real stake in managing their own lives, their own well-being, their own resources, to work at the livelihoods and the potential they have. Programs of microcredit, of village banking, of helping to start local industries become crucial. But think

about it: not being able to move from one community to another hinders everything, not being able to get goods to market reduces well-being.

Thus I would put my effort into these three areas and start community by community—health, education, and building an interdependence between communities. If I could do that in several places in the world, consistently year by year, I think I could develop an undergirding to the values we all talk about, and that in turn would then enable us to convince people that, for the good of humankind, we ought to limit our own material growth, to feel that responsibility—to be connected to one another in a positive way, yet to create that sought-after balance between human needs and wants and a healthy environment, to be able, indeed, to balance the global ecosystem.